DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 170 916 EA 011 677

AUTHOR Owens, Robert G.
TITLE Inquiry in Educational Administration: A Time for New Directions.
PUB DATE 12 Apr 79
NOTE 20p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (San Francisco, California, April 8-12, 1979)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Educational Administration; *Educational Research; *Research Methodology; Scientific Methodology; Social Science Research

ABSTRACT

The impact of the social and behavioral sciences in the 1950s led to a desire for a thorough rethinking of educational administration. Research emphasis was placed first on the internal organization of educational administration, was shifted in the late 1960s to interorganizational and extraorganizational relationships, and with the recent accountability movement has returned to the nature of the interior of the organization. Unfortunately, this research has had little effect on practice and has failed to produce any overarching "grand theories." One reason for this failure may lie in researchers' dependence on hypothetico-deductive reasoning drawn from the natural sciences. Such research follows a well-established pattern: the theory is stated, variables are assigned, instruments are designed to gather quantitative data, and the data are analyzed for compatibility with the theory. This technique presupposes a theory adequately grounded in empirical knowledge. It may be time to make an effort at increasing this knowledge by borrowing from social science research methodology. Qualitative studies of this type, involving detailed observation of actual educational practice through time, have been limited in number but have proved quite valuable for generating new theory. (Author/PGD)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED170916

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

INQUIRY IN EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION: a time for new directions

Robert G. Owens
Indiana University

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

R. Owens

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Presented at

Symposium 29.14: Methodological Issues in Administrative Inquiry

American Educational Research Association

April 12, 1979

San Francisco, California

EA 011 677

INQUIRY IN EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION: a time for new directions

by

Robert G. Owens

Professor of Education

Indiana University

Two notions basic to research are that (1) ideas that we hold are relevant to explanations, and (2) data from experience are relevant to explanations. Thus, in administrative inquiry, the study of educational organizations and the behavior of people in them is, and has long been, a central focus of research. A review of the history of administrative inquiry and, specifically research in educational administration, reveals not only the maturation of a science but also the impact of powerful social, political, and economic turbulence in the environment in which educational organizations exist.

This is illustrated by the relative frequency of studies of the internal organizational arrangements of schools (e.g., leadership, organizational climate, decisionmaking, informal organization) reported in the decade roughly encompassed by 1955 to 1965. Following the social and political upheavals of the late 1960's, however, there was a marked tendency for administrative research to be directed toward the interface of educational organizations with the larger environment. This led to some decline in systematic attempts to describe and explain the internal arrangements of schools and a concomitant increase in research intended to explain interorganizational and extraorganizational events.

But the contemporary demand for increased effectiveness of educational organizations appears to be once more stimulating research at the intraorganizational level. Congressional concern over the apparent low effectiveness of massive Federal programs to produce significant educational outcomes at the school level has, for example, prompted a series of studies that appear to underscore the importance of understanding the nature of schools as organizations and the behavior of people in them in designing programs aimed at increasing their effectiveness.[1]

As is well known, the social and behavioral sciences became sources of knowledge, theory, and research methods with which to rebuild the very conceptual underpinnings of educational administration beginning in the 1950's. Such theory was embraced for the potential it held both as a framework for thoughtful analysis and also for the direction it gave in designing research.

The collective determination to reorient disciplined administrative inquiry toward a social-scientific approach has had mixed consequences. One consequence has been to break down the isolation of educational administration from the social-science academic disciplines and traditions. From these sources, we have acquired richer understandings of such things as organization design, contingency motivation and motivation acquisition, contingency leadership and contingency decisionmaking, the cultural context of the school, and the politics of cultural pluralism which have immeasurably added to our sophistication as compared with the early social-scientific pioneers of the "new movement" in administration in 1950.

But, impressive as this may be, it is perhaps more impressive that all of this appears to have made remarkably little difference in the way that administration is practiced. Lest we become unduly defensive on this point, let me hasten to add that the gap between research and theory on the one hand and practice on the other hand, has plagued management and administration constantly not only in education but in all fields. Mason Haire, in his McGregor Memorial Lecture of 1967 said, for example, "Let me say at the outset that I find the contribution of the social-sciences to the present practice of management disappointingly small."[2] He went on to point out that numerous books and articles have been published on the contributions of behavioral sciences to management "and yet," Haire observed, "the practice of management remains the same. To be sure, managerial vocabulary has changed. The well-rounded manager now speaks of . . . cognitive dissonance, and role conflicts, but he does just about the same thing he's always done."

In a similar vein, Daniel Griffiths said in 1976, ". . . the paradigm presently used in educational administration is neither useful nor appropriate because it is no longer fruitful in generating powerful concepts and hypotheses, does not allow us to describe either modern organizations or people in them and, as a result is not helpful to administrators . . . the fault is not so much in the methodology employed as in the substance. In other words, the tools and methods of research (commonly called the scientific method) are adequate, but what the tools and methods are used on is not."

"The paradigm consisted largely of the Getzels-Guba social systems model, role theory, decision theory, bureaucracy, and systems theory. The theories held many assumptions in common. They assumed that organizations have goals which members strive to attain, that there are roles, sets of expectations for the members which are agreed upon (the nomothetic dimension), that behavior is more or less governed by a set of rules (bureaucratic structure), that decisionmaking is a systematic process, that only legitimate power is employed, and that merit is superior to politics. Administration, organizations and organizational behavior were viewed as essentially orderly and rational."[3]

Clearly, there is widespread concern that our theorizing and research lack the power to affect administrative practice that had once been envisioned. Griffiths, like Haire, makes the assumption that our problems lie--not in our research methodologies--but with our theorizing. And so he points later in his paper to fresh attempts at conceptualizing the organization. Not surprisingly such ideas as Weick's middle-range theories of social systems;[4] Cohen, March, and Olsen's garbage can model of organizational choice;[5] and Weick's notion of educational organizations as loosely-coupled systems[6] are among the ideas that are proferred as examples of fresh attempts at organizational theorizing.

It may well be, of course, that our problems of linking research to practice lie in inadequate theory. I, for one, think that it is probably time that we gave more thought to contingency approaches to organizational theory in education. There has been much dis-

appointment that some thirty years of theorizing and research in administration have not produced any overarching "grand theory" under which our research and teaching could be subsumed. In many fields of administration and management, there is growing conviction that contingency theory may be the overarching view that we have sought. But that is a discussion for another time.

I want to turn now to Griffiths assumption that "the tools and methods of research (commonly called the scientific method) are adequate, but what the tools and methods are used on is not."

At this point, I think we ought to remind ourselves that our concern with research methodology reflects a larger, long-standing concern among not only social scientists generally but physical scientists as well: that is, is there such a thing as the scientific method for generating knowledge? Or is there more than one way of knowing? Most of us have learned, as Griffiths has suggested, that there is one method of science: it is, essentially, the method we usually asssociate with the natural sciences and is generally known as the hypothetico-deductive method.

But as Conant pointed out fifteen years ago in his charming and lucid little book, Two Modes of Thought, "the more one studies the steps by which rapid advances have been made in the natural sciences, the more difficult it is to describe the ways in which wide generalizations and new concepts have originated," Conant went on to observe, "the one thing that does seem certain is that one must speak of the ways, for there is no single way. This is the reason why it is worse that nonsense to speak of the scientific

method."[7] (Emphasis in the original). The point is that empirical-inductive methods of science have obviously had great utility in systematic inquiry. Somewhere along the line, the generalizations arising from such study take on the larger sense of concepts, hypotheses, theories, and even laws. Given these broader generalizations enables one to think in a different, yet equally scientific, way: often called hypothetico-deductive. Much of modern inquiry in educational administration has been identified with the hypothetico-deductive method.

Use of hypothetico-deductive reasoning in scientific investigation presupposes that we possess considerable general knowledge about matters under consideration. Indeed, it presupposes that we have some rather well-developed theory upon which we are basing our hypothesizing and deducting. But when we acknowledge that our theory is weak and lack confidency in what we suppose is knowledge about educative organizations it seems, at best, questionable to persist in behaving as though such were not the case when we set out to engage in administrative inquiry.

The history of the social sciences as they developed from their nineteenth-century beginnings is filled with epistemological issues related to the "two modes of thought"--that is, deductive and inductive--to which Conant referred. Bacon had discussed "two modes of knowing." William James described the tender-minded (rationalist) and the tough-minded (empiricist). Others have spoken of the theoretical and the practical. It is but a short step to the use of such terms as "soft" and "hard", "pure" and "applied", "natural" and "social".

Administrative research has been heavily influenced by psychology, as indeed has the whole larger field of organizational theory and organizational behavior. Research in psychology has traditionally favored the classical experimental paradigm often associated with laboratory study. Largely from this tradition, we have inherited a strong bias toward research paradigms that are characteristically (1) hypothetico-deductive in design and (2) quantitative in method. In educational administration, at least, this has often taken the form of investigations intended to test theoretic propositions in real-world environments. The methods used are rarely experimental, of course, but may instead by generally described as quantitative.[8]

Conventionally, the approach of quantitative research is organized by a research design in which ". . . the researcher begins with an existing theory which (s)he uses to set up an articulated problem in advance of the inquiry. The next step is to convert the problem into dependent and independent variables. Having done this (s)he then proceeds to develop strategies and instruments, attempting to control and uncover relationships between (and among) the naturally occurring variables through the design. Analytic processes are generally performed after the data are in and usually follow a pattern which was part of the original design. Once the research steps are complete, the researcher then returns to the theory to the theory to interpret the results and modifies that theory as a result of his/her new findings."[9]

Early social scientific students of educational administration sought--by utilizing a research paradigm and methods such as these--

to "be scientific." The use of theory, in a hypothetico-deductive sense, as a guide to research was a very strong and central characteristic of the so-called "new movement" in educational administration that had its heyday from the mid-fifties to the mid-seventies.

But we stand now at a time and place where even the strongest advocates of systematic inquiry in educational administration acknowledge that the theories we have been using lack the necessary power and scope. Therefore, the hypothetico-deductive, essentially quantitative approach to administrative research, is not, in fact, leading to the powerful scientific generalizations that we seek. Many practitioners of administration have long felt that the theory and research which they love to ascribe to "ivory-tower professors" had little relationship to the "real world" of educational organizations. Many scholars have been growing in awareness that, as Griffiths has said, our theories are inadequate and we need to search for new approaches to theory and concept development about educational organizations and the behavior of people in them. What does this suggest in terms of research methodologies?

The answer for many students of educational administration in recent years has been to consider what other legitimate research strategies might be available. This has generated a remarkable upsurge of interest in what is widely referred to as "qualitative" research. Unlike the conventional quantitative approach, which derives its tradition from the physical sciences, qualitative research strategies are derived from social sciences--principally

anthropology and sociology. The anthropologist speaks of ethnography. The sociologist tends to use the term field observation study or field methods. The methods are, essentially naturalistic: that is, as Filstead put it, "Qualitative methodology refers to those research strategies, such as participant observation, in-depth interviewing, total participation in the activity being investigated, field work, etc., which allow the researcher to obtain first-hand knowledge about the empirical social world in question. Qualitative methodology allows the researcher to 'get close to the data', thereby developing the analytical, conceptual, and categorical components of explanation from the data itself."[10]

This latter characteristic is crucial to theory-development. Whereas the conventional hypothetico-deductive approach to the design of most quantitative research begins with an existing theory which is used to frame the research problem, naturalistic/qualitative approaches may be the source of theory-building concepts. Thus, by generating a deeper understanding of the functioning of an educational organizational system, one hopes to develop a theory of practice in educational administration which grows out of a sensitive first-hand understanding of the system itself.

It is a bit of a simplification, but not much, to think of qualitative/naturalistic research methods as being suited to generating concepts and hypotheses and conventional quantitative methods suited to test them in the real world. In that light, it appears to me that one concerned with theory-development in administrative inquiry, must attend to the suitability of research method-

ology to that purpose. I suspect that our difficulty in generating powerful generalizations through administrative inquiry arises from the fact that "Many of the concepts and much of the theory we have adopted and adapted from the behavioral and social disciplines [were] first developed in the study of business or government organizations which may or may not be analogues of schooling organizations. Similarly, the meaning and function of the concepts may or may not be the same in education. Those . . . who propose the use of field methods in the study of educating organizations, start from the assumption that the test of the empirical world begins in the empirical world itself since operational reality exists there."[11]

I think that James S. Coleman put it very well almost fifteen years ago: "It is painfully evident to anyone who attempts to study a social system that our quantitative research techniques are in their infancy. For, by sensitive observation and description (as exemplified, say, by William Foote Whyte's Street Corner Society), we can trace the functioning of a social system. Yet, when we attempt to carry out quantitative research in such a system, we find ourselves stymied. We shift from a sensitive examination of events, in which intimate sequence in time, suggests causal relations between events, to a crude measurement of 'characteristics' and a comparative cross-sectional analysis that relates one characteristic to another. That is, when we shift from qualitative reporting to quantitative analysis, we change our very mode of inference.

In qualitative description, we report a stream of action in which the interlinking of events suggests how the system functions."[12]

It is important to notice here that Coleman is not talking about beginning with a model, hypothesis, or theorem; rather he suggests starting with understandings of frequently minute episodes or interactions that are examined for their broader patterns and meanings. Thus theory is seen as grounded in empirical experience in the holistic context of the social system under study.[13] This, it seems to me, is an important new direction for administrative inquiry to take.

While few, if anyone, would argue that there is one best way of conducting research in educational administration, there is little question that conventional quantitative research has enjoyed the lion's share of prestige and visibility. This is, as Willower has explained, because "Educational research has its main heritage in psychology, stemming primarily from the descriptive, experimental, and measurement aspects of that discipline. In colleges of education, departments of educational psychology typically have been responsible for instruction in research methods, and the faculty members of those departments often have been viewed as experts in research, circumstances which have helped to maintain the dominance of their methods."[14] Further, as Rist put it, "We are not dealing with a situation of parity among the various research methodologies. Quantitative research is the dominant methodology in educational research. It is more widely published, taught, accepted, and rewarded in educational research circles than any

other approach. In the extreme, quantitative research is characterized as equivalent to 'The Scientific Method.'[15] For example, in their widely-used and highly influential textbook on research methodology, Campbell and Stanley refer to this methodological approach to research as "the only available route to cumulative progress."[16]

Since it is our intent to build a science of educational administration, it is crucial that we attend to developing strategies for informing and for theorizing on the basis of appropriateness or effectiveness for doing the job. I think, therefore, that in the field of administrative inquiry, we must acknowledge that a variety of methodological strategies are available and each should be judged in terms of its apparent effectiveness in informing our science. There is a legitimate place in administrative inquiry, I think, for atheoretical status and descriptive studies. Surely there is a place for quantitative research methods. And, certainly, there is a legitimate place for qualitative/naturalistic research methodology. Issues over the collection of data such as the popular conflict over qualitative, "soft" data versus quantified, "hard" data are irrelevant in selecting research methodology for our scientific inquiry. Certainly arguments over quantitative versus qualitative in terms of which is "real" research are not productive. I think though that it is highly desirable that we move in the direction of increasingly literate dialogue about the proper role and function of each method in terms of building a systematic body of theory and knowledge arising from the existential

realities of administrative practice and capable of informing administrative practice.

This is a time that calls for reconsideration of the theories that we have sought to use in studying educative organizations and a search for new sources of theory. I submit that an important new source for generating hypotheses in the phenomenological context of the culture of those organizations. Studies such as Lortie's landmark Schoolteacher,[17] Wolcott's The Man in the Principal's Office,[18] Dreeban's On What is Learned in Schools,[19] Sarason's The Culture of the School and the Problem of Change,[20] and Herriott and Hodgkins' The Environment of Schooling[21] are a representative few of the many major works that are now available that illustrate the utility of qualitative studies for illuminating the phenomenological and contextual realities of educative organizations.

But qualitative studies need not be large-scale, such as these, in order to be holistic. Numerous strictly circumscribed and sharply-focused studies are also being reported. A decade ago, for example, Smith and Geoffrey reported using ethnographic techinques to build a description of one urban classroom from which they were able to generate verifiable hypotheses. In this case, Geoffrey was the classroom teacher and Smith the observer and, together, they gathered data for a semester in a single classroom. During that long observation period, Geoffrey--the teacher--wrote field nots after each day of teaching. Smith kept running observational records during class time and, after school, developed general summaries and interpretations of those notes.

The product of their intensive study of a single urban classroom over a long period illuminates, for example, how particular patterns of teacher-pupil interaction developed over time.[22]

I mention this interesting study here because it illustrates several things. For one, it illustrates the way in which sensitive qualitative/naturlistic research can help us to get a close-up view of relevant events and pattern of their flow, providing a depth of understanding as to their meaning and interrelatedness. For another, it illustrates that opportunities to conduct worthwhile research abound in the "real world" of our day-to-day experience with schools and other educative organizations. All too often, it seems to me, we strive to divorce research from the day-to-day experience that we have with the organizational phenomena that surround us. I think that an important potential contribution of qualitative/naturalistic research may be the encouragement that it gives us to look afresh at the phenomenological realities of the organizational context. Or, in plain English, it is necessary that we as researchers first learn to see the world as practitioners do so that we may understand the complex and ambiguous questions that they raise.

It is time for us in educational administration to take a careful look at the research strategies available to us with a view to selecting a methodology for a given study not on the basis of tradition or convention. Rather, we should select the method of choice likely to be most effective given the purpose and circumstances of the investigation. This requires that we develop

a better understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of qualitative/ naturalistic strategies so that the choice of method will be more deliberate and more carefully attuned to the needs of our knowledge base and the need for informed administrative practice.

NOTES

1. See Paul Berman and Milbrey Wallin McLaughlin, and others, Federal Programs Supporting Educational Change, Vol. VII: Factors Affecting Implementation and Continuation, R-1589/7-HEW (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 1977) and Paul Berman and Milbrey Wallin McLaughlin, Federal Programs Supporting Educational Change, Vol. VIII: Implementing and Sustaining Innovations, R-1589/8-HEW (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 1978).

2. Mason Haire, "Coming of Age in the Social Sciences," Industrial Management Review, Spring, 1967, pp. 109-118.

3. Daniel E. Griffiths, Contemporary Theory Development and Educational Administration. Draft of remarks to Symposium on Administrative Theory, AERA convention, New York, April 5, 1977.

4. Karl E. Weick, "Middle-Range Theories of Social Systems," Behavioral Science, 19, 6 (November, 1974), pp. 357-367.

5. Michael D. Cohen, James G. March, and Johan P. Olsen, "A Garbage Can Model of Organizational Choice," Administrative Science Quarterly, 17, 1 (March, 1972), pp. 1-25.

6. Karl E. Weick, "Educational Organizations as Loosely Coupled Systems," Administrative Science Quarterly, 21 (March, 1976), pp. 1-18.

7. James Bryant Conant, Two Modes of Thought: My Encounters with Science and Education (New York: Trident Press, 1964), pp. 2-5. After attaining eminence as a research chemist and president of Harvard, Conant devoted many years to the study of educational administration. In this charming little book, he incisively analyzes the problems of applying scientific methods in both natural science and social science.

8. In this discussion, I use the terms quantitative and qualitative as suggested by Michael Scriven in "Objectivity and Subjectivity in Educational Research," Chapter V in Lawrence G. Thomas, ed., Philosophical Redirection of Educational Research, The Seventy-first Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1972).

9. Francis A. J. Ianni, "Field Research and Educational Administration," UCEA Review, Vol. XVII, No. 2, February, 1976, p. 12.

10. W. J. Filstead, Qualitative Methodology (Chicago: Markham, 1970), p. 6.

11. Ianni, op. cit.

12. James S. Coleman, "Research Chronicle: The Adolescent Society," in Philip E. Hammond, ed., Sociologists at Work (New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1964).

13. B. Glaser and A. Strauss, The Discovery of Grounded Theory (Chicago: Aldine, 1967).

14. Donald J. Willower, Some Issues in Research on School Organizations. Paper prepared for a UCEA Seminar on Research in Educational Administration, University of Rochester, May, 1977, p. 2.

15. Ray C. Rist, "On the Relations Among Educational Research Paradigms: From Disdain to Detent," Anthropology and Education Quarterly, 8, (May, 1977), 2, p. 42.

16. D. T. Campbell and J. C. Stanley, Experimental and Quasi-Experimental Designs for Research (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1963), p. 3.

17. Dan C. Lortie, Schoolteacher (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975).

18. Harry F. Wolcott, The Man in the Principal's Office (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, Inc., 1973).

19. Robert E. Dreeben, On What is Learned in Schools (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1968).

20. Seymour B. Sarason, The Culture of the School and the Problem of Change (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1971).

21. Robert E. Herriott and B. J. Hodgkins, The Environment of Schooling: Formal Education as an Open Social System (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1973).

22. Louis M. Smith and William Geoffrey, The Complexities of an Urban Classroom: An Analysis Toward a General Theory of Teaching (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968).